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TAGS: PREL PGOV KDEM PTER LE SY

SUBJECT: LEBANON: TACTICAL FLIRTATION (BUT NO STRATEGIC INFATUATION) BETWEEN AOUN AND MARCH 14

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

¶11. (C) Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri appears, inadvertently, to be a miraculous match-maker: after years of political warfare, March 14 leaders and Michel Aoun's bloc are now gingerly exchanging tender glances, tentatively discovering beauties in each other that neither perceived before. March 14 and Aoun share a horror at the precedent of Berri establishing himself up as the exclusive king maker in Lebanon's presidential elections; by flirting with each other, they hope to shrink Berri's inflated role. Their mutual antipathy to LAF Commander Michel Sleiman's presidential dreams also encourages a second look at each other. Whatever the motivation (and Aoun ally Michel Murr claims some credit), Aoun's rhetoric regarding March 14 shifted from belligerent to benevolent almost overnight, and Marwan Hamadeh blew kisses back via Lebanon's most-watched televised talk show.

¶12. (C) In addition, Aoun MP Ibrahim Kanaan and Senior Advisor to the PM Mohammed Chatah, over a 9/27 lunch we hosted, conspired on how to bring their sides closer together. In a Sadat-to-Jerusalem moment, Aoun proposed visiting Walid Jumblatt, who accepted (with the exact time TBD). Soon, Saad Hariri's advisor Ghattas Khoury will call on Aoun, who also sent reconciliatory messages our way. UN envoy Geir Pedersen, who saw Aoun this morning (9/28), reports that Aoun has the excitement of a school boy thrilled to be at the center of attention. In a delightful development, Pedersen also claimed that Hezbollah is already concerned by the potential shift in Aoun's affections.

¶13. (C) Yet while this sudden, improbable discovery of the other sides' charms has tactical advantages for both Aoun and March 14, the fancy is probably fleeting: relations will again sour when Aoun discovers that his new friends still block his path to Baabda Palace, and March 14 leaders discover that Aoun's heart stays true to his presidential ambitions. Like school yard crushes, this nascent infatuation could end before ever really taking off. But for now, we are enjoying the possibility that Berri and Hezbollah might become jealous of their two-timing Aounist allies. End summary and comment.

BERRI PARLAYS POLITICAL, PARLIAMENTARY ROLES
INTO ESTABLISHING HIMSELF AS PRIMARY KING-MAKER

¶4. (C) Nabih Berri, displaying his usual tactical brilliance, has over the course of the past several weeks used the combination of two separate roles -- his "national" position as Parliament Speaker and his "political" position as front man for the Hizballah-Aoun-Amal opposition -- to establish himself as the primary channel to determine Lebanon's next president. He claims the exclusive right to set the electoral schedule, to determine whether a gathering counts as an electoral round, to interpret the ambiguous constitution, to convoke parliamentary leaders for consultations, and to judge who counts as a consensus presidential choice. This role does not sit well with many people.

BUT BERRI'S PRESUMPTUOUSNESS
PROVOKES COUNTER REACTION

¶5. (C) Berri's presumptuousness has provoked a counter reaction in the March 14 camp as well as among Michel Aoun's followers, who do not like the precedent of a Shia figure playing the predominant role in orchestrating the presidential results. Saad Hariri told us that his 9/27 visits to Maronite Patriarch Sfeir and Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea were intended to show that Berri is not the exclusive channel for communication with the Christians. Aoun bloc MP Ibrahim Kanaan reported that Aoun's 9/25 call -- using uncharacteristically moderate language -- for unconditional dialogue among political leaders was also a signal to Berri that the Speaker cannot speak for the Aoun bloc. The role of creating the president, Kanaan insisted, should be primarily a Christian responsibility.

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AOUN MP KANAAN AND MOHAMED CHATAH
EXPLORE COMMON INTERESTS

¶6. (C) On 9/27, the Ambassador hosted a private lunch for Senior Advisor to the PM Mohamed Chatah and Kanaan, both of whom sent word that they would welcome such an invitation. They identified three areas on which the Aoun bloc and March 14 seem to be in agreement: on process, they agreed that Berri's prominence must be reduced. On candidates, they agreed that LAF Commander Michel Sleiman should not be president and that the constitution should not be touched. On substance, they agreed that a new president, new PM, and new cabinet should be bound by certain principles (commitment to the implementation of UNSCR 1701, the Special Tribunal, adoption of a fair election law, etc.). They also agreed that, the more that people can agree on such principles now, the less likely it is that the new officials will be immediately thrust into the type of stalemate and crises plaguing Lebanon now.

¶7. (C) Chatah proposed to Kanaan that Aoun authorize three March 8-Aoun officials to work with three or four March 14/GOL officials to see whether they could hammer out a statement of principles for the incoming administration. This would be a service to Lebanon, Chatah agreed, and put Berri on notice that "he doesn't have the only game in town." This approach could corner Hizballah, that might be forced to break with Aoun. Kanaan agreed in principle, but he noted that the committee could not appear to be a plot designed to deny Aoun the presidency. If the committee is mere bones being thrown to an abandoned Aoun candidacy, then it can't work. Chatah answered that, by the same token, the committee cannot be seen as a vehicle that will guarantee an Aoun presidency. The two agreed to determine how the name of the candidates could be placed aside, at least for now, for the purpose of this committee.

KANAAN SEEKING TO STRENGTHEN
MODERATES IN AOUN CAMP

¶8. (C) Kanaan reported frustration that March 14 leaders had not responded positively to Aoun's 9/25 change in tone and call for unconditional dialogue. March 14 leaders did not like the conditions Berri put in his 8/30 initiative, yet March 14 leaders nevertheless publicly praised Berri, as did the international community. No one even commented upon Aoun's more generous offer. Kanaan then launched a long diatribe against the "extremists" within the Aoun camp. These "extremists" tell Aoun that March 14 will never accept him and that his only chance is to take a confrontational approach in solidarity with Hizballah. This week, Aounist "moderates" convinced Aoun that the confrontational approach was getting him nowhere -- the Americans shunned him and toyed with sanctions, March 14 leaders relegated him into irrelevance, and Berri ignored him. Yet, with Aoun's reconciliatory message universally ignored, the moderates in the Aoun camp will be discredited.

¶9. (C) Objecting, Chatah said that Kanaan shouldn't expect a reaction to a call for dialogue that came weeks late and that was a pitiful attempt to play catch-up. Aoun should be happy for March 14 silence, which was better than Aoun's belligerent attacks on the March 14 proposal for unconditional dialogue two weeks earlier. The Ambassador noted that, whatever Aoun's motivations, it was in March 14's interest to react positively. Let's see whether we can strengthen the moderate side of the Aoun camp, the Ambassador said; let's send a signal to Berri and Hizballah that they cannot take Aoun's support for granted. Chatah agreed, saying that he would make that suggestion to Saad Hariri and PM Fouad Siniora after lunch. Chatah and Kanaan vowed to keep in touch.

JUMBLATT TO RECEIVE AOUN

¶10. (C) Later on 9/27, the Ambassador met with Walid Jumblatt, who said that Aoun, earlier that day, had sent an intermediary to propose a meeting. Moreover, Aoun proposed paying a call on Jumblatt in his Clemenceau Residence, rather than insisting Jumblatt visit him (as normal protocol, given that Aoun was once PM, would suggest). Asking the Ambassador

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what he thought, Jumblatt said that he had already accepted in principle. While noting that he wanted to share word with his March 14 allies first, Jumblatt thought that the meeting might take place as early as Monday, 10/1. Imagine, Jumblatt mused, what Hizballah will think of its ally Aoun, when Aoun appears at Clemenceau, in apparent deference to Jumblatt. It is almost as if Aoun will have denounced his MOU with Hizballah, Jumblatt argued. (We also suspect Jumblatt likes the idea of showing Saad Hariri that Jumblatt should not be taken for granted.)

HAMADEH BLOWS KISSES
IN AOUN'S DIRECTION

¶11. (C) Jumblatt, and, later, Marwan Hamadeh both agreed with the Ambassador that the cost of sending positive signals to Aoun cost little but could have enormous gain. Hamadeh, appearing on Lebanon's most-watched political talk show on 9/27, found several opportunities to tell host Marcel Ghanem and thousands of viewers how much in common March 14 had with the values of Michel Aoun. Hamadeh praised Aoun's call for dialogue. ("Nauseating, no?" Jumblatt laughed at one point, in a phone call to the Ambassador.) A happy Kanaan, watching the show with Aoun, called both Chatah and the Ambassador to express appreciation.

AOUN DELIGHTED; HIZBALLAH LESS SO

¶12. (C) On 9/28, in a meeting with the Ambassador, UN

Special Coordinator for Lebanon Geir Pedersen said that Marwan's appearance had the intended impact on Aoun's attitudes. The normally grumpy General was like a "delighted little boy," Pedersen said. Aoun enumerated the many principles March 14 and he had in common, which in Pedersen's analysis indicated that Aoun was relieved to see a potential escape from an alliance with Hizballah that never felt comfortable to many of his followers. "Who knew it was this easy (to turn Aoun around)!" Pedersen laughed. He also claimed that "his usual Hizballah suspect," Wafiq Safa, in a 9/27 meeting was already suspicious that Aoun's affections were wavering. While Safa was interested in promoting the idea of a compromise presidential candidate, he expressed fear that it was no longer out of the question that Aoun and Geagea would come together, maybe not to create but to block candidacies that Hizballah thought were acceptable.

MICHEL MURR TAKES CREDIT
FOR NEW, IMPROVED AOUN

¶13. (C) Meeting with the Ambassador and Pol/Econ chief on 9/28, MP Michel Murr -- allied with Aoun, but not a member of Aoun's party -- took credit for the reconciliatory language of Aoun. Murr claimed that he, alone of all of Aoun's allies, could speak frankly to Aoun, with the rest of the MPs fearful of Aoun's wrath. Murr asked Aoun what had he gained from the verbal attacks he had been waging against March 14 and the GOL. After the Metn elections, Aoun could no longer claim that he had the support of two-thirds of the Christians. Murr claimed that half of Aoun's bloc would follow Murr into supporting a consensus candidate rather than Aoun. With this threat, Murr was able, he insisted, into getting Aoun to try a kinder, gentler approach.

HARIRI SENDS KHOURY TO SEE AOUN

¶14. (C) The Ambassador met one-on-one with Saad Hariri on 9/28. "Something is happening with Aoun," he said, unprompted. While he was not yet ready to meet with Aoun, he would respond to positive messages from Aoun by sending his advisor Ghattas Khoury to Aoun, either today (9/28) or tomorrow. Hariri said that he had talked with Geagea about Aoun, and Geagea was "comfortable" with the flirtation with Aoun.

POWERFUL BRAKES ON A BUDDING ROMANCE:
AOUN'S INSATIABLE PRESIDENTIAL AMBITIONS

¶15. (C) Our GOL and March 14 interlocutors are, so far, delighted that Berri's maneuvers seem to have given Aoun

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second thoughts about the path he has chosen. Even rival presidential candidate Nassib Lahoud, meeting with us on 9/27, thought it worth trying to cultivate a relationship with Aoun for as long as possible. But Hariri, Jumblatt, Chatah, Lahoud, and even Pedersen predict that, sooner or later, the budding romance will collapse. Aoun will realize that, while March 14 leaders may be willing to consider a brief affair, they still look for a presidential marriage with Nassib Lahoud or Boutros Harb. And March 14 leaders will see that Aoun has most likely not abandoned his dreams of the presidency. The price for continuing a March 14-Aoun alliance indefinitely is probably higher than either side is willing to pay.

COMMENT

¶16. (C) Berri seems to be the person who is encouraging a closer relationship between Aoun and March 14 leaders, but not for reasons he would welcome. While the immediate motivation for this potential courtship seems to be a shared

March 14-Aoun unhappiness over the role Berri has set for himself, the deeper background is more interesting. Let us hope that Aoun has at last awakened from his ego-driven delusional stupor, so that he sees that his alliance with Hizballah is not leading him to the presidency and has chipped away at his popularity. March 14 leaders may finally understand that their own popularity has been bruised by political stalemate and crises. Both Aoun and March 14 leaders face roadblocks in their respective paths and could theoretically forge a better route together.

¶17. (C) In terms of commitment to Lebanon's independence and sovereignty, a March 14-Aoun alliance makes far more sense in principle than either the existing March 8-Aoun alliance, or the 2005 Hizballah-Amal-Jumblatt-Hariri electoral alliance. But we predict that March 14 leaders and Aoun will not be able to forge a lasting partnership because of the insoluble dispute over who should be Lebanon's next president. In the spirit of reconciliation in the air, we will see Aoun next week. But we doubt he's ready to talk about being king-maker rather than king. Nevertheless, this current exploration between the two sides is mostly positive news. Even if nothing comes out of the ongoing contacts, having Hizballah and Berri thrown off-balance during the weeks leading to presidential elections is a positive outcome in itself.

¶18. (C) There is one danger: that this nascent flirtation by March 14 creates a monster, a resurgent Aoun who cannot be stopped. After all, this is a complete reversal of the previous March 14 policy of attempting to marginalize Aoun and render him irrelevant. We see Samir Geagea, Aoun's long-time arch-rival, on Saturday (9/29) and will explore with him the possibility that March 14 could be accidentally propelling Aoun to Baabda Palace by restoring his credibility and thus reversing the decline in his popularity. We expect that Geagea will be the first to raise the alarm bells within March 14, should the unpredictable and uncontrollable Aoun come closer to the presidency through closer relations with March 14.

FELTMAN